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THE OLD TESTAMENT WISDOM (*CHOKMA*).

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THE Hebrew word *chokma*, as used in the Old Testament, stands for wisdom, both divine (Prov. 3 : 19) and human (Dan. 1 : 17). As expressive of the latter it has both a general and a special meaning. Its general meaning is somewhat varied, a knowledge, *e. g.*, of nature (1 Kings 4 : 33), of human affairs (Isa. 19 : 11), the gift of poetic and sententious speech (1 Kings 4 : 32), skill to foretell the future, to interpret dreams, and to conjure (Ex. 7 : 11; Dan. 5 : 11) being all comprehended under the term. Among the Hebrews the wise man (*chakam*) was the learned man in general (Jer. 8 : 9), whether in the character of judge (1 Kings 3 : 28), or ruler (Deut. 34 : 9), or artificer (Ex. 28 : 3; 31 : 6; Jer. 10 : 9), or cunning and subtle man (Job 5 : 13; *cf.* 2 Sam. 13 : 3; 20 : 16).

In the more special signification of the word, it denotes wisdom with a strong ethical quality, as rooting itself in the fear of the Lord, and applying the truths of divine revelation to the various relations and circumstances of life—wisdom, in a word, as inclusive of all virtue. In this sense it is frequently represented by the Hebrew word *tushiya* (Prov. 2 : 7; 3 : 21; 8 : 14; 18 : 1; Job 11 : 6; 12 : 16; 26 : 3), which the Revised Version renders by “sound wisdom,” and which means *well being and wisdom* in one. The definition given by James of the wisdom that is from above (3 : 17) not inaptly expresses the higher meaning of the Old Testament *chokma*, and in giving this definition James may have had this word in mind.

The Old Testament wisdom wears a decidedly philosophical aspect; and while it can hardly be affirmed that the Hebrews had a philosophy in the form of a well-defined system, it must yet be admitted that in their striving after objective wisdom

the essential elements of philosophy were present. Not a few scholars have regarded philosophy as an exercise of the human intellect carried on according to strictly logical and scientific methods; and as thus understood it admittedly had no place among the early Hebrews or indeed among any of the older eastern nations. But philosophy looked at in the light of its etymology, and as the whole method and practice of the oldest Greek philosophers down to the time of Aristotle demonstrates, is simply a love of wisdom; an earnest endeavor to find a theoretical and practical solution of the contradictions and enigmas which have ever obtruded themselves upon the attention of thoughtful men. Even within the domain of heathendom may be discovered that tendency of mind which is the essence of philosophy. Whenever men have tried to solve the mysteries which they have discovered in the world within them and in the world without them, they have philosophized.

In Solomon's time Jewish thought had begun to concern itself with the great moral problems of the world. Reflecting upon the world presented by revelation, it sought to acquaint itself with those subjects which are not directly determined in revelation, and hence arose the Old Testament *chokma*, or what may be designated the *philosophy of the Hebrews*.

This philosophy bears some resemblance, indeed, to that of other nations in that it concerns itself, not with the ordinances and history of the theocracy, but with cosmical arrangements and the moral relations of men. On this account it has been likened to the physics and ethics of the Greeks. Still, the Old Testament wisdom (*chokma*) is essentially different from the latter. It is based, indeed, like the Greek philosophy, upon observations of nature and human affairs, and especially upon the hoarded experiences of past generations (Job 5:27; 8:8; 12:7-12; Isa. 40:21, 28); but in these investigations it has the advantage of planting its feet on the solid ground of God's revelation and starting with a supernaturalistic assumption to which the Greek wisdom can make no claim.

It never entered into the thought of the Old Testament sage to prove the existence of God, or the creation of the world by

him; for the first of these truths is assumed, and the second expressly declared in Gen. 1:1, and the denier of these truths is deemed a fool (Ps. 14:1). In the Hebrew literature of wisdom the questions concerning the origin of the world and evil, which play a conspicuous part in the philosophy of ancient and modern times, are only incidentally discussed, and then only in their bearing upon practical morality.

While the Old Testament wisdom forms with the law and prophecy a special province of knowledge, it is yet in an important sense independent of them. The facts of divine revelation and the theocratic ordinances constitute simply the soil in which wisdom roots itself—the soil upon which spring up not merely a practical piety, but an impulse to knowledge. It was while the Levitical institutions were regularly performing their functions and the Mosaic ordinances were impressing their stamp more and more indelibly upon the life of the nation that the leading minds, with the king at their head, gave themselves up to a deeper search into things human and divine, and so reached the idea of the Old Testament wisdom (*chokma*).

The *chokma* did not certainly approve of heathenism, but it took no part with the prophecy in the struggle of the latter against it; it confined itself rather to the task of discovering and emphasizing general religious-moral truth and using it for the ennobling of the Israelites as men.

Taken in its widest extent, the circle of the *chokma* literature embraces the Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. These books constitute its code. And remembering the practical character of the *chokma* instruction—its adaptability to promote practical piety—it might be said that Job teaches men how to suffer well, the Psalms how to pray well, Proverbs how to act well, Ecclesiastes how to enjoy well, and the Song of Songs how to love well.

The books more specially marked by this literature are Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. The description of wisdom in Job 28:12 ff. is sufficiently like that in Prov. 8:25 ff. to suggest the same source—the same school of thought. Job is represented as “the greatest of all the men of the East” (1:3), with whose

wisdom that of Solomon is expressly compared (1 Kings 4:30). The Book of Job abounds with apothegms of the proverb type, one of which became the motto and theme of the Book of Proverbs: "The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil, that is understanding" (Job 28:28; Prov. 9:10). The problem with which the Book of Job deals is: Why do the righteous suffer? And its aim is to controvert the theory dominant at the time when it was written, that suffering is a sign of the divine displeasure and presupposes sin on the part of the sufferer. The scenes amid which the poem of Job is placed could hardly have occurred to a Hebrew mind before the wide contact with the Gentile world which Solomon's reign opened up.

While in Prov. 1:20 wisdom is introduced as a person, speaking as a woman, uttering her voice in the streets, in Ecclesiastes the writer seems to identify himself with the wisdom with which he was so highly gifted in such way that wisdom appears to speak through him. His twofold object appears to have been: first, to show where happiness could not be found, and, second, where it might. The first lesson of the book is, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," and the second, "Fear God and keep his commandments." The Book of Proverbs, however, stands at the head of what have been called the sapiential books of the Old Testament. It is preëminently rich in its lessons of practical wisdom. Its central principle is that goodness is wisdom and vice and wickedness folly. It contains the aphorisms of particular sages and sets forth the fundamental principles in which the true wisdom of life is established.

The golden age of the *chokma* literature of the Hebrews began with the reign of Solomon. In response to his request of the Lord to be enriched with wisdom and knowledge (2 Chron. 1:7-12) the Lord endowed and honored him with a larger measure of these than was enjoyed by any of his contemporaries (2 Chron. 9:23). When the queen of Sheba heard his answers to her questions—her riddles, that is, or other ingenious puzzles (*chidhoth*) designed to test his sagacity, she exclaimed: "Happy are thy men, happy are these, thy servants, which stand continually before thee, and that hear thy wisdom" (1

Kings 10: 3-8). His "wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the East, and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men; than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman [to whom the eighty-ninth and eighty-eighth Psalms are respectively ascribed], and Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol: and his fame was in all the nations round about" (1 Kings 4: 29-31).

Solomon's manifold intercourse with foreign nations, which extended to Tarshish and Ophir, and the prosperity and peace which marked his reign would be favorable to philosophical inquiries, and tend to the enlargement and perfection of his human and secular knowledge. Before his time the conditions of such inquiry and of the literature which grew out of it did not exist. The proper foundations of a national culture had not yet been laid. Before the Israelitish mind could be in a position to give itself to research and instruction of this kind, the stormy and troublous times of the judges should end, the power of external enemies be broken and overthrown, the political and social rights of the citizen firmly secured, and the theocratical national life permanently established. But all this could only be effected through the brilliant though warlike reign of David. Furthermore, the schools of the prophets which sprang up in the time of Samuel, by giving a new invigoration to the spirit of the law, would contribute to the internal culture of the nation. Then, too, a proper literary and æsthetic form would be created for this philosophy by the national poetry which David was so largely instrumental in creating, and which was a fitting precursor to the proverbial poetry of Solomon.

Associated with Solomon were the *chakamim* ("the wise") or teachers of wisdom (Prov. 1: 6; 10: 8; 13: 20), who began to perform an important part in the training of the nation. The names of some of them are given in 1 Kings 4: 31—already quoted. The allusions made to these wise men show that they must have formed, if not a distinct school, yet a prominent class in ancient Israel (*cf.* Jer. 18: 18; Prov. 22: 17; Job 15: 18).

The *mashal* ("proverb") became through Solomon's influence a special branch of Jewish literature, and the peculiar

poetic form of the *chokma*. In the Book of Proverbs the name *divere chakamim* ("words of the wise") is used for and synonymous with *meshalim* ("proverbs"). A careful examination of the proverbs in which *chakamim* occurs shows that this term has not merely a common ethical sense, but begins to be the designation of those who made wisdom, that is, the knowledge of things in their essence, their life study, and who formed in oneness of sentiment and pursuit a particular circle in the community

Proverbial instruction is common in the early history of most nations, especially in the East. It is happily suited to excite attention, to favor habits of reflection, and to fasten truth upon the memory in an agreeable and impressive form. And in proportion as peoples have been able to make moral distinctions their proverbs have approached a higher character and standard. They have seized upon the proverb, which was primarily and essentially a *similitude*, as a fitting vehicle for the transference of the lessons suggested by the facts of man's common life, or even those of brute nature, to the region of man's moral and spiritual being.

With the name of Solomon, however, who exceeded all his contemporaries in the fertility and many-sidedness of his genius, the use of proverbs is especially associated. He wrote, we are told, no fewer than 3000; but many of these are lost, for the Book of Proverbs contains only 915 verses, and the last two chapters are assigned to other authors. Solomon set the example of the study of nature, though hardly in a strictly scientific way, and many of the lessons which he inculcates are drawn from the habits and instincts of the lower creation (1 Kings 4:33; Prov. 6:6-8).

From the consideration of wisdom as a principle controlling the arrangements of nature and regulating human society the step was not a far one to its *personification*. Accordingly it is represented in Proverbs as preaching to men, setting before them the issues of life and death, giving the spirit to those who do not resist (1:23), refusing to answer the prayer of those who do (1:28), having a premundane existence (8:22-31), survey-

ing and superintending the work of creation, "sporting always before him, sporting upon his earth, and my delights were with the sons of men." Dorner says: "This description of wisdom cannot but remind us of the sympathetic, divine-human Teacher who took the form of a servant." Oehler, commenting on the ironical question of Job 15:7 ff., remarks: "How are we here reminded of the $\delta \tilde{\omega} \nu \epsilon \iota \varsigma \tau \acute{\omicron} \nu \kappa \acute{\omicron} \lambda \pi \omicron \nu \tau \omicron \upsilon \pi \alpha \tau \rho \acute{\omicron} \varsigma$ ("who was in the bosom of the Father"), and how justly has Ewald found in this passage an echo of the subsequent idea of the Logos!" Perhaps, too, the "son" of God in Prov. 3:4 may be thus explained.

Too strong words cannot be used in commendation of the study of the Book of Proverbs, especially by the young. Says Professor M. Stuart: "All the heathen moralists and proverbialists joined together cannot furnish us with one such book as that of the Proverbs." Says Coleridge: "The Book of Proverbs is the best statesman's manual which was ever written." What a blessing to the nation if politicians and public men generally would follow its teachings!